

The Heartfelt Story of our Backyard Bluebirds

My husband and I have had the privilege of being landlords to bluebirds for several years and we also monitor bluebird trails. We learn new things about these beautiful birds by observing them, reading about them and learning from other blue birders. This past week has been a week when we really learned a lot and were challenged in new ways.

We have room for only one bluebird nest box on our small city lot in Amherst, Ohio. Many times bluebirds have nested in this box and fledged young from it. The chance to watch the entire parenting process and chick growth is amazing each time! Since we provide mealworms for the bluebirds on our kitchen window feeder we have also had the unusual opportunity to regularly see them as close as a couple of feet away. They stay in our area year round so we have been able to observe them even when they are not nesting. We admire so many characteristics about them -their care for their young, their courtship rituals, their feeding habits and their protectiveness of each other and their young.

This year our dominant pair of bluebirds began building a nest in mid-March and established that our back yard was their territory as they chased other bluebirds away, guarded their box from house sparrows and patiently waited for warmer days to start egg laying. Finally on April 6th the first egg was laid in the nest and by April 11th there was a very full clutch of 6 eggs! We happily took pictures of the new nest and eggs and didn't take offense at the intense swooping the adults gave us any time we ventured near their nest! They were experienced parents who were doing everything they could to ensure their eggs survived. We watched as the temperatures dropped to 25 degrees on April 16th and worried that the eggs might have gotten too cold to hatch even though mom was sitting on them patiently. However on April 24th there were 6 little newly hatched bluebirds in the nest and we rejoiced again! During the following 17 days we saw the parents busily feeding the young, carry out many fecal sacks and defend their nest from anything that got too close to the box- sparrows, squirrels, any other birds and us! We provided live mealworms twice a day and watched the parents make trip after trip to the nest box to feed their young. Mom bluebird would stuff 6- 8 mealworms at one time in her beak but Dad only ever took one mealworm per trip. After the young bluebirds were 12 days old we no longer opened the nest box- we didn't want to possibly cause premature fledging by startling the young birds.



One day old bluebirds



4/29 photo- 5 days old



5/3/14 photo- 9 days old

My friend Diane Lehman who lives in the same town had 4 young bluebirds that were due to fledge around May 12. This was the same time that our back yard bluebirds were due to fledge. However, both parents of our 6 young bluebirds disappeared the day before fledge day!!!

Since young bluebirds need at least one parent to care for them for 2-3 weeks after they fledge, these young bluebirds would not survive. Their calls for their parents that evening were heartbreaking to hear. My husband and I watched the nest box for over an hour, put out live mealworms as usual for the adult bluebirds, and whistled but no flash of blue wings appeared. No swooping from defending bluebird parents as I approached the nest box to check the young. We knew the adults would never have left the young for this long....something disastrous had happened to both of them on the same day!

Fostering orphaned young bluebirds into a nest with similar aged young gives the best chance of survival for the orphans. Diane's 4 young bluebirds were only 1 day older than our 6 young bluebirds but the parents could not possibly care for 10 young so I transported only 2 of our young to her house and carefully placed them in her nest box on the evening of May 11th. Her young were peering out the nest box hole and would be fledging very soon! I called many of our

Black River Audubon Society bluebird trail monitors but no one else had young close to the same age as our young except Diane so I had no other options but to try to find a bird rehabber to take the remaining young. I sent out many emails that evening and by morning had received a response from many people anxious to help but no one had appropriate foster nests. I appreciated lots of good advice in reply calls and emails however. Lake Erie Nature and Science Center also called me back later that morning and would have taken our orphans. Bluebirders are wonderful friends aren't they?!!

Back to the Wild in Castalia thought they could save our 4 young bluebirds if I could bring them to their facility by morning. At 6:30 am when we got up my husband saw that one of our young was getting ready to fledge, was perched at the nest box opening and calling for her absent parents. It did fledge as Fritz approached the box but he gently picked it back up from the ground and put it back in the box then blocked the opening by taping a flat square of wood over the hole. This prevented any further fledgling attempts until I was able to take them to Back to the Wild, a 40 minute drive from our house. However, when I arrived and the rehabber opened the box, she found only 2 bluebirds in the box and one of those was dead. ☹ She put the single surviving young bluebird in an incubator to warm up and explained how they cared for the young rescues there. What an interesting place!! I hope to visit it again soon without the stress of dropping off orphans!

I realized that the missing two young must have fledged BEFORE we got up and were probably somewhere in our back yard. When I returned home I did a grid walk in our back yard but didn't find anything. However during the grid walk in our neighbor's yard I heard a young bluebird calling and after locating only one of the missing two fledglings, I decided to transport her to Diane's house where I knew her young bluebirds were in the process of fledging that morning too! When I arrived I placed the nest box upright on the ground near the pole of Diane's nest box, removed the wooden hole block and retreated to my car to watch our little female re-fledge! It was so neat to see the foster parent bluebirds immediately move to protect her as well as the several other young bluebirds in the yard!! Lots of activity and excitement with 7 fledgling bluebirds now in the yard and 2 adult bluebirds flashing here and there! I took several pictures as our re-fledged little female hopped over to a "foster sister" then proceeded to follow her out of my sight toward the calling mother!

The chances of survival for any fledgling bluebird are only about 50% that it will live to be one year old. It is a very tough world out there as we all know whether you are human, bird or any other living species. My back yard is empty of flashing blue wings for the first time in many years. I am going through "bluebird withdrawal" I think! If any of you have closely watched a bluebird nest you know what it feels like after the young bluebirds successfully fledge and the parents take them away to teach them to forage for themselves .It is a true "empty nest"

feeling of loss. I hope that soon another pair will notice our empty nest box and decide to start a family. Meanwhile I am providing mealworms from our kitchen window feeder to the parent chickadees that have 8 growing young in our front yard. I am also driving to Diane's house twice a day for a couple of weeks to put live mealworms in her feeder to try to help her very busy bluebirds as they feed lots of hungry mouths! Below is a picture of the little female who fledged in our neighbor's yard then was taken to Diane's home where she "re-fledged". The third photo shows her on the right as she meets her foster sister.



The photos on the following page are photos of our father and mother bluebirds as they cared for their young on 5/9/14.

On 5/11 the parents were mysteriously gone. Fledge day for the young was on 5/12. Three of their six young were fostered out to another nest nearby with similar aged young, one was missing after it fledged, one died before it could be saved and one was doing well at Back to the Wild where it was taken to be rehabbed.



Photos and story by Penny Brandau